



CHAPTER 6: School Transportation Considerations

CHAPTER 6: SCHOOL TRANSPORTATION CONSIDERATIONS

6.1 IDENTIFICATION OF SCHOOL RELATED ISSUES

During the development of this Transportation Plan there were several issues identified from the public and the project oversight committee relative to the community's schools. This is often times the case in smaller communities, and Whitefish is no exception. Within the Whitefish School District, there are currently four (4) public schools as noted below:

- Muldown Elementary School (Kindergarten thru 4th Grade)
- Central School (5th Grade thru 8th Grade)
- Whitefish High School (9th Grade thru 12th Grade)
- Whitefish Independent High School (10th Grade thru 12th Grade)

In addition, there are several private schools in the community. These include the Whitefish Christian Academy and the Children's House Montessori School.

The following start and stop times are currently in place for the four (4) Whitefish public schools:

Muldown Elementary School

Kindergarten 8:45 am to 3:15 pm

Grades 1 thru 4 8:35 am to 3:30 pm

Central School

Grades 5 thru 8 8:30 am to 3:22 pm

Whitefish High School

Grades 9 thru 12 8:40 am to 3:30 pm

Independent High School

Grades 10 thru 12 8:15 am to 3:30 pm

Many of the issues that have been identified by the public and the City of Whitefish staff are issues commonly expressed in other small communities. These issues are reiterated herein, however it must be recognized as a prelude to the narrative that funding is typically the biggest hurdle to accommodating many of these recognized and/or perceived problems. An example that is readily apparent is that of crossing guards. Almost all agree that crossing guards are a desirable feature around the community's schools, however funding the guards given limited school district financial resources are often a hurdle that cannot be overcome. Additionally, staggering school start and stop times appears proactive and easy to do, however academic requirements set forth in the "No Child Left Behind" legislation means optimizing available time and leaves little wiggle room for drastic changes.

The following items of concern were raised by members of the general public and the city of Whitefish staff – in no order of importance:

School busing

The overall perception is that there is very little busing of students in the community. Individual comments regarding this have centered on the potential for more busing of students in an effort to remove the private automobile as the mode of choice from the transportation system. The perception by those making this comment suggest the school district should increase the level of busing in the community. Implementation hurdles exist to this, though, chiefly revolving around funding limitations. As a long term goal, however, it may be something the community can work towards as time goes on.

School Access

There were several issues identified with overall access to some of the community's schools. This was chiefly centered on Muldown Elementary School and the Children's House Montessori School. Most of the traffic accessing these locations mingles with the Whitefish High School traffic at Pine Avenue and effects two major intersections (Pine Avenue / 7th Street and 7th Street / Ashar Avenue). It is recommended later in this plan (**chapter 8**) that two (2) additional connections be developed in this area to provide additional options to access these schools. Project number **MSN-5** in **chapter 8** is intended to provide an easterly extension of 7th Street and wrap southerly to connect with Voerman Road at the intersection with Monegan Road. Project number **MSN-15** is intended to provide a one-way exit route along 8th Street between Ashar Avenue (easterly project limit) and the existing 8th Street terminus (westerly project limit).

School Crossing Guards

The issue of the need for additional crossing guards in the community was made by several citizens, parents and city staff. Specific reference for additional crossing guards was made for the intersections of:

- Pine Avenue / 7th Street;
- 7th Street / Ashar Avenue; and
- 2nd Street / Baker Avenue

Again, the subject of additional crossing guards is generally accepted as desirable by all parties. Implementation hurdles are realized, though, based on lack of financial resources. Although a volunteer crossing guard program could be explored in the future, there are issues with volunteers not showing up (for example when ill) and not having a formal back-up process in place.

Central School (Whitefish Middle School) Issues

There were several comments made during the development of this Plan that the Middle School has major traffic issues. The school is located downtown and school traffic mixes with commuter traffic. Most parents drive their kids to school. Car-pooling could be better encouraged by the school and it would be helpful to have a school directory for the parents.

From a traffic flow perspective, the school is ahead of the game somewhat in that their bus loading and unloading zone is fairly separated from the major traffic obstacles. Their designated areas are on the east side of the school (Kalispell Avenue). Some thoughts have been to allocate a certain amount of school parking spaces and/or drop off space in the new

parking garage being designed for construction on the west side of Spokane Avenue, however this may be tenuous at best. From a practical point of view, it would be desirable to segregate school staff parking away from the adjacent parking spots around the school in the new parking garage. In reality, though, preliminary discussions have questioned the fairness of allocating spots in the new garage to any specific user, but rather make all parking spaces available to the general public and downtown patrons. This is an item of negotiation between parties being most affected. Whatever the solution becomes, the recognition should be that the availability of parking along the street faces adjacent to the school are somewhat lacking, and this is compounded by parents tendency to always want to drop their children off as close as possible to the school front doors.

There is some planning in regards to the block immediately south of Central School, and initial concepts have shown angled parking along the south side of Second Street (between Spokane and Kalispell) with curb bulb-outs at the relevant intersections. Curb bulb-outs should be supported at these locations as they heighten the visibility of the pedestrians, narrow the lane width, and reduce the distances that pedestrians have to travel.

It may be beneficial to provide a map at the beginning of each school year showing parents where the school district would like to have students picked up and dropped off. It must be recognized, though, that parents generally will pick-up and drop-off their students where it is convenient for them to do so, and not necessarily where the District and/or city would like it to occur.

Whitefish High School

Issues associated with the Whitefish High School were also identified during the course of this Transportation Plan development. Concerns were expressed that due to the campus having no lunch facilities and being an “open” campus, that there is a llarge exit of students over the lunch hour and as such students drive all over town very quickly to find a lunch spot. It was stated that the local PTA is very interested in closing the high school campus by next year for at least freshman and sophomores, although that group is typically of non-driving age or is beginning to drive.

Final comments have implied that there is very little incentive for high school kids to walk and/or bike to school, and also that there is very little busing of kids. Therefore, most kids drive to school, mainly by themselves. Public comments received have stated that the Creekwood neighborhood has become the main transportation route between school and the soccer/baseball fields and other activities. Apparently, the Creekwood Homeowners Association has complained numerous times to the police department concerning school traffic speeding thru the neighborhood. The homeowners association has resorted to making their own signs placed on tree stumps throughout the neighborhood asking drivers to please slow down. Suggestions have been made that the high school should consider some incentive for kids to walk and/or bike to school and that the speeding issue in this neighborhood should be given further attention.

6.2 SAFE ROUTES TO SCHOOL PROGRAM

Many of the issues identified in **section 6.1** could best be fleshed out through a formal *Safe Routes to School (SRTS)* program. Although many of the school related issues do fall within the purview of a citywide Transportation Plan, requests for incentives, traffic control and speeding relief are often symptoms of a greater issue that may not be resolved by infrastructure alone. The formal SRTS program is the logical venue to build community consensus on school related programs and issues.

In a nutshell, Safe Routes to School (SRTS) are a national effort to bring schools and communities together to make walking and bicycling to school safer and improve the health of our children. The Montana SRTS Program is in place and offers guidance on developing a successful SRTS program and showing how Montana's SRTS Program can help make a difference in the quality of life for children and in school neighborhoods. The overriding goal of SRTS is to increase the number of students that walk or bicycle to school along safe routes. Meeting this goal is critical to the health and welfare of our children.

The Montana Safe Routes to School Program is administered by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and helps make positive changes that allow parents and children in grades K-8 to choose a safer and healthier way to get to school. A formal SRTS program will offer ways to help meet community goals and objectives by changing behaviors to ensure:

- The community, especially parents and school officials, believes in the value of walking and bicycling to school and encourages children to do so.
- The community considers the safety needs of children walking or bicycling in their neighborhoods when planning for residential and school areas.
- Streets and roads in the community are designed to encourage walking and bicycling, with sidewalks, bicycle paths or bicycle lanes, and traffic-calming measures.
- Drivers are educated to understand behaviors of child pedestrians and bicyclists and how safe driving can decrease traffic congestion and reduce the risk of injuries to children.
- Children and parents understand how to walk and bicycle safely and assertively.
- Officials enforce laws that support and protect walkers and bicyclists.

SRTS programs help change behaviors by combining aspects of health, fitness, traffic relief, environmental awareness and safety. Comprehensive and effective SRTS programs typically include **Evaluation, Education, Encouragement, Enforcement, and Engineering** strategies. These strategies (sometimes called the 5E's) are described below:

- **Evaluation:** Collecting data and assessing existing conditions to identify potential problems and collecting data after SRTS activities are introduced to measure the success of your efforts.
- **Education:** Teaching children about the broad range of transportation choices, instructing them in important lifelong bicycling and walking safety skills, and launching driver safety campaigns in the vicinity of schools. Educational components are also often directed at parents and drivers.
- **Encouragement:** Using events and activities to promote walking and bicycling.
- **Enforcement:** Partnering with local law enforcement to ensure traffic laws are obeyed in the vicinity of schools (this includes enforcement of speeds, yielding to pedestrians in crossings, and proper walking and bicycling behaviors), and initiating community enforcement, such as crossing guard programs.
- **Engineering:** Making operational changes or physical improvements to the infrastructure around schools to reduce speeds and conflicts between with motor vehicle traffic, and establish safer and fully accessible crossings, walkways, trails and bicycle facilities.

Although each strategy can be implemented by itself, the **most successful SRTS programs combine multiple strategies**. By directly or indirectly incorporating some or all of these strategies, SRTS programs offer parents a chance to work in partnership with their children's school, the community, local governments to create a healthy lifestyle for children and a safer environment for all.

Montana's SRTS Program offers funding through a competitive application process for non-infrastructure and infrastructure projects within a 2-mile radius of schools serving children in grades K-8. Non-infrastructure (or behavioral) projects generally include activities associated with **Education, Encouragement, Enforcement** and **Evaluation** strategies. Infrastructure projects are focused on specific facilities (crosswalks, sidewalks, and pathways) associated with the **Engineering** strategy.

It is highly recommended that a formal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program be developed for the Whitefish Schools. Grant funds are available to assist with this through the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). The MDT has prepared a very thorough SRTS Guidebook that provides technical assistance for schools and communities in Montana interested in establishing SRTS programs. Whether a school or community is new to the idea of SRTS or they have already identified problems and started working towards a plan, the Guidebook contains several needed anecdotes that will help the SRTS effort. This document is organized into chapters devoted to various aspects of SRTS and provides:

- An overview of SRTS and why it's needed in our communities;
- Guidance on how to start a program and establish goals;
- Ways to identify and document conditions limiting walking and bicycling to school;
- Ideas to educate and encourage safer walking and bicycling;

- Descriptions of different types of physical improvements that may create safe walking and bicycling routes to your school;
- Enforcement ideas to change hazardous driver behaviors; and
- Ideas to help you fund and implement SRTS activities and projects.

The Montana SRTS Guidebook outlines a proven process for developing and implementing SRTS plans. It highlights resources in Montana that can be accessed and use to support SRTS efforts in the community or school.

The Montana SRTS Guidebook can be viewed at the MDT SRTS website at the following address:

http://www.mdt.mt.gov/pubinvolve/saferoutes/docs/safe_routes_guidebook.pdf